

TIF 4 Maine Schools for Excellence: A Communications Guide for Districts

Introduction

Stakeholder engagement and clear and effective communications are essential components of the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF 4) Maine Schools for Excellence (MSFE) work. Implemented well, effective communications and engagement ensure buy-in at all levels and mitigate common pitfalls, such as conveying mixed messages or letting misunderstandings linger. Because change is difficult, strong, well-thought-out communications are important in any initiative.

This document is intended to offer guidance to MSFE districts in using the existing materials from the Communications Toolkit (found in Appendixes B–D in this document), crafting additional district-specific messages, and identifying audiences and stakeholders for outreach.

The goal of this guided action plan is to help district steering committee members think about and plan communications strategically and comprehensively. Ultimately, district-based communications efforts will help ensure that the new evaluation and professional growth program, compensation program, and broader human capital management system are implemented smoothly in a manner that will lead to effective outcomes while generating broad stakeholder support.

This guided action plan offers an overview of existing resources with accompanying questions for consideration by steering committee members to allow each district to customize their outreach.

Getting Started

The district steering committee is the ideal starting place for conversations about communication because there are representatives from various schools and roles. To start, you may want to devote some time at a meeting to taking stock of where you are currently in your district. For example:

- What has already been done regarding communication and outreach about MSFE?
- What percentage of school leaders and teachers in your district do you estimate know about the MSFE work?
- What common questions or misconceptions have you heard from others?

From there, take some time to figure out whether communications will be the task of the entire group or whether you want to form a subgroup or have one member who is principally charged with overseeing communications efforts.

Communications Best Practices

The following are communications best practices for district steering committees' consideration while developing district communications plans:

- Be proactive. Offer information as it becomes available but in a purposeful way so that audiences feel supported but not overwhelmed.
- Be responsive. Listen to and promptly address questions and misconceptions.
- Be consistent in messaging. Use the proper terminology and branding for all materials.
- Be consistent in both where and how information becomes available. For example, if you create a section of your district's website devoted to MSFE, ensure that it becomes a reliable information repository for downloadable documents, etc. Reserve mass e-mails for important announcements that affect a large number of people and are time sensitive.
- Avoid jargon and keep language simple and clear for the intended audience.
- The success of any communications plan is determined by those who experience it. It is important to collect ongoing feedback from intended audiences.

Identifying Your Audiences/Stakeholders

Key stakeholders for these communications and engagement activities may include the following groups:

- Teachers and other school-based staff
- School principals and other school-level administrators
- Superintendents and other district administrators
- Local professional association leaders and representatives
- Local school board members
- Students and parents/families
- News media

The types of communications strategies and tactics may differ by stakeholder group. In addition, there may be instances when the key messages will be tweaked depending on the audience. For example, classroom teachers and school-level administrators may require a greater level of detail on certain points.

District Steering Committee Decision Points	Guiding Questions
Identify key audiences in your district.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Who is likely to be directly impacted by the project?2. Who should be hearing about the project proactively?3. Who, once informed, can help inform others?

Identifying Key Messages

Key messages are the core concepts that people should understand about the project. Generally, they should be focused on basic questions of who, what, and why. Some key messages should remain constant across all MSFE districts, although there will be a need to create district-specific key messages as well.

Core MSFE Key Messages

The following key messages pertain to the initiative as a whole and should be included in MSFE districts' communications activities as appropriate:

- The Maine Schools for Excellence initiative aims to improve student learning by better recruiting, retaining, rewarding, and supporting teachers and school leaders.
- Our theory is that an integrated and coherent human capital management system (for a definition of human capital management system, visit <http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence/resources/glossary.html>) will enhance educator effectiveness by offering all educators high-quality feedback on their practice, ongoing professional development, and fair and equitable opportunities for recognition and reward.
- The comprehensive human capital management system we are working toward includes the following components:
 - School environment
 - Educator preparation
 - Selection and induction
 - Evaluation and professional growth
 - Recognition and reward
- The Maine Schools for Excellence initiative has two distinct but aligned phases. During the 2010–11 school year Maine was the recipient of a Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF 3) grant that brings the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to provide professional development and aid in the development of new evaluation instruments and performance-based compensation at 23 schools. During the 2012–13 school year, Maine received a second Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF 4) grant to focus on a broader human capital management system, of which professional development and new evaluation instruments are a part, in four school districts. Both grants provide funding and support for five years.
- The Maine Department of Education has partnered with nationally recognized organizations to bring research-based ideas and strategies to our state—and then to adapt them based on the Maine Schools for Excellence districts' individual needs. All partners are committed to working with local districts to appropriately modify plans.
- These two grants provide a unique opportunity for our state as a whole to learn from participating districts and how they develop new systems and build their own capacity over time to do this important work.

MSFE District-Specific Key Messages

Because the local context differs across TIF 4 MSFE districts, it is recommended that district steering committees devote time to developing district-specific key messages for communications as well.

Action Steps for Developing District-Specific Key Messages	Guiding Questions
<p>To identify additional key messages for your district, begin by drafting concise statements like the ones above that aim to address misconceptions and/or provide more detailed information that you think your audiences will want to know.</p> <p>Consider gathering quotes or testimonials to share the perspectives of those involved in designing and implementing the various pieces of the human capital management system.</p> <p>Identify and apply communications strategies to disseminate these messages (see below).</p> <p>Schedule regular intervals to revisit these action steps and guiding questions to refine and adapt your district-specific key messages.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What matters most to stakeholders in your district? For example, if you know that there is concern that teachers won't be involved enough in the decision-making process, plan to regularly share what you are doing and incorporate teacher feedback to ensure that teachers' voices are heard.2. What common concerns or misconceptions do you hear about MSFE? Plan to address these concerns through clear, proactive messaging.3. Who is involved in your district steering committee? Sharing the names and roles of committee members might be helpful in showing that a broad group of stakeholders is coming together to make these changes and helping staff across the district identify a familiar name associated with the initiative. Including photographs of committee members can make them even more approachable.4. How does the MSFE work build upon what already exists in your district? How does it align with and further your district's vision and mission?

Identifying Strategies for Communications

Once district steering committees have spent time considering who their key audiences are and what their key messages are, the next step is figuring out various strategies for communications and matching these strategies to the appropriate purpose. Five strategies for consideration are:

- Collateral: Create materials to serve as key content for other strategies.
- Interpersonal: Provide opportunities for personal interactions to exchange information, engage in productive dialogue, and gather feedback.
- Digital: Create instant, anytime access to documents and information.
- Social media: Reflect the growing trend for a preference for this type of communication by engaging in online interactions about the issues.
- Traditional media: Utilize media strategically at the right time and for very specific purposes.

The following table shows suggested next steps for each strategy type.

Strategy	Next Steps and Considerations
<p>Collateral: Create materials to serve as key content for other strategies.</p>	<p>Some examples of collateral have been created to be shared across MSFE districts. These include a one-page overview, a list of questions and answers, a brief PowerPoint introduction, and an updated MSFE website (http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence/).</p> <p>Consider how you will use this collateral to inform your key audiences. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The one-page overview and questions and answers documents could be distributed as handouts during in-person meetings. They could also be attached to an e-mail to teachers and principals in which you introduce MSFE and explain why your district wanted to get involved. • The PowerPoint could be used to give an introduction to MSFE during upcoming teacher professional development sessions, professional association meetings, or parent gatherings. You could request that MSFE staff copresent with members of the steering committee in your district. • The materials could also be used to conduct a “brown-bag lunch” for central office employees. <p>Gather success stories and positive quotes from teachers and school and district leaders involved in MSFE. These stories and quotes can be used in future communications and also shared with MSFE staff to be used centrally.</p> <p>Consider creating an introductory memo or an all-staff e-mail as a communications kickoff. This introduction should be personalized to your district, explaining how students, teachers, and principals stand to benefit from your participation in MSFE. This is also a chance to clarify how each school is involved and who the members of your district steering committee are.</p>

Strategy	Next Steps and Considerations
<p>Interpersonal: Provide opportunities for personal interactions to exchange information, engage in productive dialogue, and gather feedback.</p>	<p>Develop a calendar of opportunities for face-to-face meetings (professional association meetings, districtwide professional development sessions, etc.) both to introduce MSFE to educators and to begin gathering feedback from the field. All opportunities for interpersonal contact should be designed to serve two purposes: disseminate/clarify information and gather feedback from stakeholders about both the MSFE initiative and the communications strategies.</p> <p>Encourage stakeholders to submit questions to the MSFE@maine.gov e-mail address that will be centrally monitored.</p> <p>Ensure that questions and concerns are addressed both accurately and in a timely manner by assigning one knowledgeable person within your district to field questions. Ideally, inquiries should receive a response within 24 hours. The assigned person should also pass along common questions or concerns to Scott Harrison through the MSFE@maine.gov e-mail address.</p> <p>Ensure that teachers' introduction to MSFE is a positive one by paying attention both to the messages conveyed and who presents them. Choose an individual with positive (or neutral) relationships with staff to be the face of the initiative, and, where possible, include an association leader or other trusted leader as a presenter.</p> <p>Teacher representatives chosen for district steering committees should proactively engage with their peers, ensuring that they expand beyond their typical circles to reach all staff.</p>
<p>Digital: Create instant, anytime access to documents and information.</p>	<p>The newly redesigned MSFE website has basic information about the project's goals, history, funding, and governance. In addition, there is a robust questions and answers page, links to resources that can inform district decision making, and downloadable resources such as the one-page overview and PowerPoint introduction.</p> <p>Consider updating your district's website with a short paragraph about the initiative with a link to the MSFE site (http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence).</p>
<p>Social media: Reflect the growing trend for a preference for this type of communication by engaging in online interactions about the issues.</p>	<p>The use of social media is in the long-term plan for central MSFE communications. Districts may want to consider using current blogs, Facebook, and/or Twitter accounts to update audiences about MSFE.</p> <p>If your district decides to use social media, designate someone to monitor comments and discussion that might ensue. Look especially for opportunities to direct people to the central MSFE website and to address misconceptions.</p> <p>Social media can be particularly effective for sharing success stories and advertising updates to the website, including newly available resources.</p>
<p>Traditional media: Utilize media strategically at the right time and for very specific purposes.</p>	<p>Media should be used at strategic points to further the goal of stakeholder support beyond those directly affected.</p> <p>Any teachers or school leaders who are called upon to provide background or direct quotes should be prepared in advance.</p>

Suggested Timeline

Communications efforts should be ongoing. Plan for a coordinated launch around the new collateral that has been created for districts' use. After an initial meeting or two to develop communications plans and messages, it would be best to devote a few minutes of time in monthly district steering committee meetings to discuss communications needs.

Appendixes

Please see the attached appendixes for additional information to guide district steering committees to create a personalized communications plan.

- Appendix A: a graphic organizer that mirrors the content above to be used to guide district steering committees in the creation of a communications plan
- Appendix B: a one-page overview of MSFE to be used as a handout or attached electronically to an e-mail
- Appendix C: a one-page questions and answers document to be used as a handout or attached electronically to an e-mail
- Appendix D: a PowerPoint presentation to be used during in-person meetings

Appendix A: Graphic Organizer

Part I: Getting Started

What has already been done regarding communications and outreach about MSFE?

What percentage of school leaders and teachers in your district do you estimate know about the MSFE work?

What common questions or misconceptions have you heard from others?

Going forward, how will communications be managed? Will it be the task of the entire group? A subgroup? An individual?

Review the communications best practices. Do they resonate with your group? Do you have others to add?

Part II: Identify Your Audience/Stakeholders

Who is likely to be directly impacted by the project?

Who should hear about the project proactively?

Who, once informed, can help inform others?

For each of the audiences identified above, spend a few minutes brainstorming the best modes of communications for each group. Consider both existing channels (e.g., an electronic mailing list of teachers) and ideal channels (e.g., an upcoming in-person gathering of parents).

Other notes on audience/stakeholders:

Part III: Identify Your Key Messages

Review the core MSFE key messages. Are these clear? Who should hear them? How? When?

What matters most to stakeholders in your district?

What common concerns or misconceptions do you hear about MSFE?

Consider if/how/when to share the names (and possibly biographies and photographs) of district steering committee members.

How does the MSFE work build upon what already exists in your district? How does it align with and further your district's vision and mission?

After discussing the above questions, use the space below to record any key messages that you determine are important for stakeholders in your district to hear.

Key Message	Intended Audience(s)

Checklist for key messages:

- Is the language accessible (simple and clear) for the intended audience?
- Is terminology used correctly and consistently? (Visit the MSFE glossary at <http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence/resources/glossary.html> for help with MSFE terminology.)
- Ask one to two stakeholders from the intended audience to read through the key messages. Ask them to offer candid feedback and/or suggestions to improve clarity or perception.
- When and how do you plan to revisit your key messages to ensure that they are working as you intended?

Part IV: Putting Your Plan Into Action

Use the following table to create a comprehensive action plan that brings together all of the pieces from above.

Collateral: Create materials to serve as key content for other strategies. Plan for how to use existing MSFE collateral.			
Product	Audience	Mode(s)	Timeline and Next Steps
<i>Example: PowerPoint presentation (already created)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central district staff Teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Brown-bag lunch" with MSFE staff Each school schedules time during upcoming staff meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By May 24 Next steps: Reach out to MSFE staff By May 31 Next steps: Ask each principal when next staff meeting occurs; schedule one to two district steering committee members to present
One-page overview			
One-page questions and answers document			

Interpersonal: Provide opportunities for personal interactions to exchange information, engage in productive dialogue, and gather feedback.

Event	Audience and Purpose	Who will present?	Date, Time, and Location
<i>Example: Professional association meeting</i>	<i>Teachers—Use this meeting to introduce MSFE and conduct open Q&A; hand out copies of one-page overview</i>	<i>Teachers association leader along with one teacher; ask if someone from MSFE staff can help field questions</i>	<i>Wednesday, May 15, at the Union Hall, 3:30 p.m.</i>

Additional considerations for interpersonal communication:

- An important part of interpersonal communication is ensuring that each gathering is an opportunity for stakeholders to both receive information and ask questions. It is helpful to have a note taker responsible for tracking questions and concerns that arise so that you can consider whether or not to address them proactively for a larger audience.
- Questions and concerns that come up frequently should be sent to MSFE staff through the MSFE@maine.gov e-mail address.

Digital: Create instant, anytime access to documents and information.	
Next Steps	Timeline
<p><i>Example: Link to MSFE site (http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence) on our district's site.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a short paragraph introduction to accompany link. • Download MSFE graphic. • Contact webmaster to figure out process for adding new text. 	<p><i>New paragraph and live link should be available by May 13.</i></p>

Social media: Reflect the growing trend for a preference for this type of communication by engaging in online interactions about the issues.	
Next Steps	Timeline
<p><i>Example: Contact administrator of our district's Facebook page. Does he or she have ideas for how social media could be used to promote MSFE success stories?</i></p>	<p><i>Have initial conversation by July 31.</i></p>

Traditional media: Utilize media strategically at the right time and for very specific purposes.	
Next Steps	Timeline
<i>Example: Figure out who the best spokespeople would be if a need to talk to the media arises. Think about people who are trusted, well spoken, and in different roles (e.g., principal, teacher, or district leader).</i>	<i>Choose three different spokespeople by May 31.</i>

Appendix B: One-Page Overview

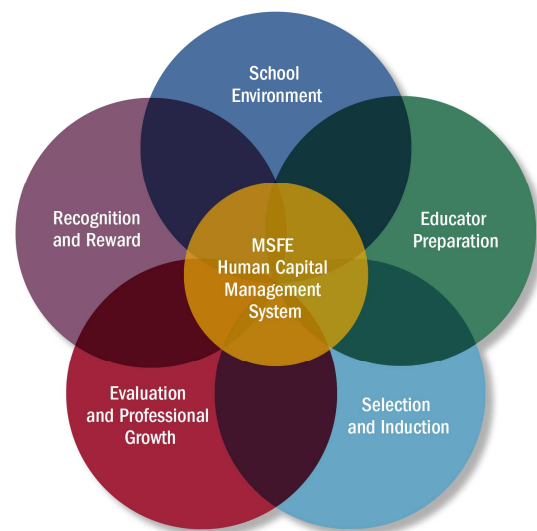
Improving Student Learning by Better Supporting the Professional Growth of Teachers and Leaders

Improving student learning and educator effectiveness is at the heart of the Maine Schools for Excellence (MSFE) project. Our theory of action is that creating an integrated and coherent human capital management system will enhance educator effectiveness by offering teachers and leaders high-quality feedback on their practice, ongoing professional development, and fair and equitable opportunities for recognition and reward. As great teachers and leaders are better supported, developed, and retained, student outcomes will improve.

Districts Take the Lead

The MSFE initiative is funded through the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF). The Maine Department of Education has received two rounds of funding—one in 2010 (TIF 3) and one in 2012 (TIF 4). Nine different districts are involved in these two distinct but aligned phases of the project. The TIF 4 districts are working together, supported by MSFE staff and external partners, to develop their own systems and models for:

- School environment
- Educator preparation
- Selection and induction
- Evaluation and professional growth
- Recognition and reward



Improving Evaluation Systems: A Starting Point

In 2012, Maine legislators passed a new law, An Act to Ensure Effective Teaching and School Leadership. This legislation requires certain elements to be present in educator evaluations. Using the new law as a starting point, MSFE districts are building comprehensive systems and supports for teachers and leaders such as goal-setting and reflection protocols, rating scales and rubrics, processes for observations, and the collection of evidence and data. In addition, these districts are focusing on the plans and pathways that will guide educators along a personalized, continuous cycle of improvement and offer leadership roles and compensation bonuses for effective and distinguished educators.

Note: This document is available for downloading at <http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence/resources/index.html>.

Appendix C: One-Page Questions and Answers Document

Who is overseeing this project?

Teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, and students all take part in overseeing the Maine Schools for Excellence (MSFE) initiative at both the local and state levels. Each of the participating school districts has assembled a local body comprising teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, teachers association representatives, community members, and others to oversee local implementation MSFE. In addition, two state-level groups—the Executive Advisory Committee and the Statewide Practitioners’ Group—provide the opportunity for cross-district collaboration and problem solving.

Which districts are involved in MSFE?

Nine districts are currently involved in MSFE in two distinct but aligned phases. The first group of districts, which began this project in 2010, are Lewiston Public Schools, Maine School Administrative District 24, Regional School Unit 12, Regional School Unit 55, and Regional School Unit 74. The second group of districts, which became involved in 2012, are Bangor School Department, Maine School Administrative District 11, Millinocket School Department, and Regional School Unit 19. There are varying levels of involvement of different schools within each district, although teachers and school leaders are involved in decision making at every level.

How is this project funded?

MSFE is funded by the national Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF), which was established by the U.S. Department of Education in 2007. Since then, there have been four rounds of TIF grants awarded to more than 100 grantees. Initially, TIF focused primarily on innovative teacher compensation models. Over time, however, the program’s focus has shifted to broader human capital management systems, of which teacher pay is only one piece. This shift occurred as lessons were drawn from the successes of the original TIF grantees. Maine is a recipient of the third and fourth rounds of funding (TIF 3 and TIF 4).

Is this program only focused on teachers?

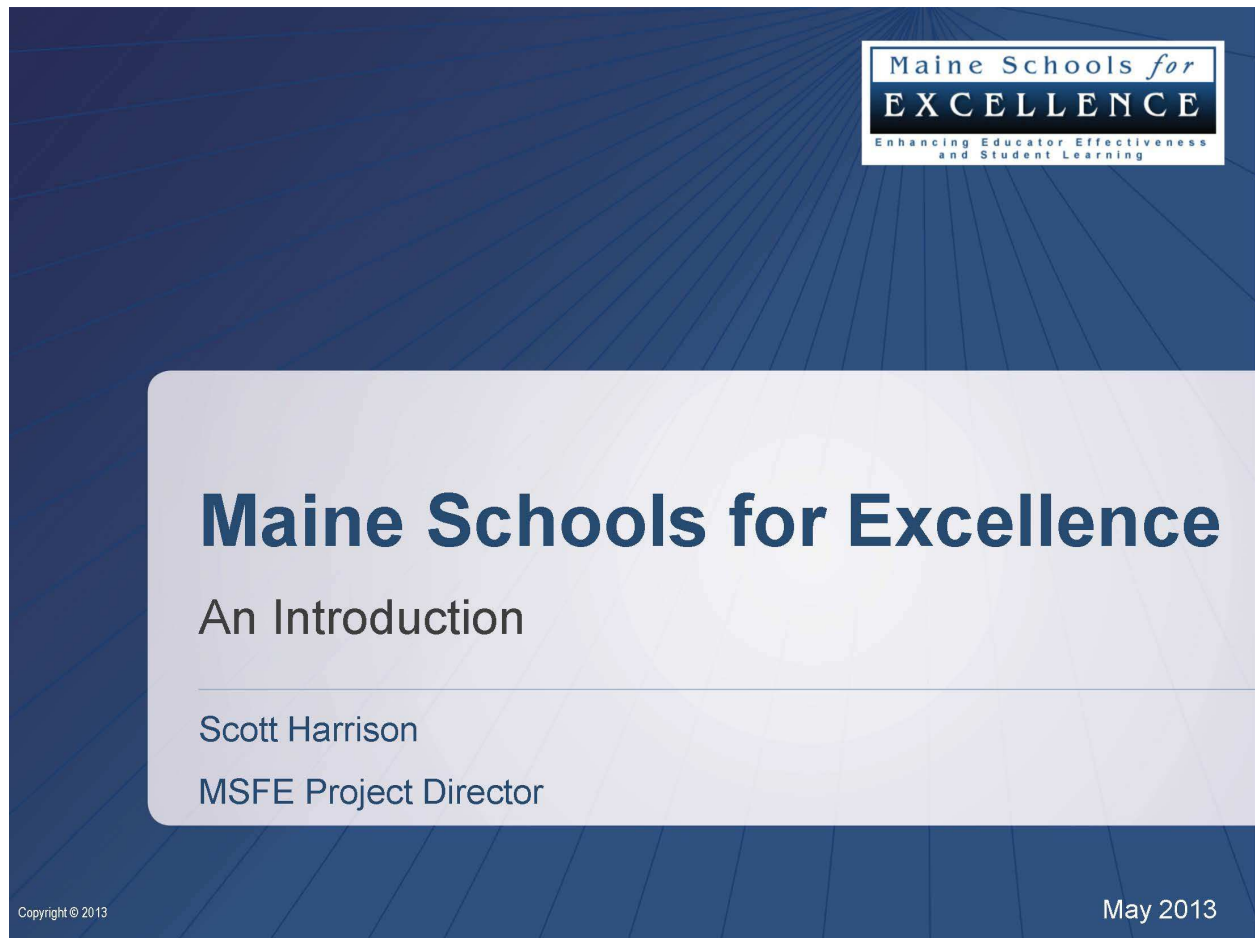
Although the project is funded by the *Teacher* Incentive Fund, the focus is actually on providing supports and opportunities for both teachers and school leaders. To that end, districts will be adapting both Teacher Evaluation and Professional Growth programs and Leader Evaluation and Professional Growth programs that share many common elements, such as self-assessment, observations that result in actionable feedback, opportunities for ongoing reflection and goal-setting, and summative ratings that are connected to placement on a personalized growth plan that includes new performance-related leadership opportunities.

Is MSFE a project that will transfer to other schools and districts?

The TIF grants that are funding the MSFE initiative do not provide for scaling up the initiative to additional districts. However, the grants require participating districts to develop long-term plans to sustain the new systems they are developing. Participating districts also expect to share the knowledge, evaluation models, and other resources they gain with other districts doing similar work going forward.

Note: This document is available for downloading at <http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence/resources/index.html>

Appendix D: PowerPoint Presentation

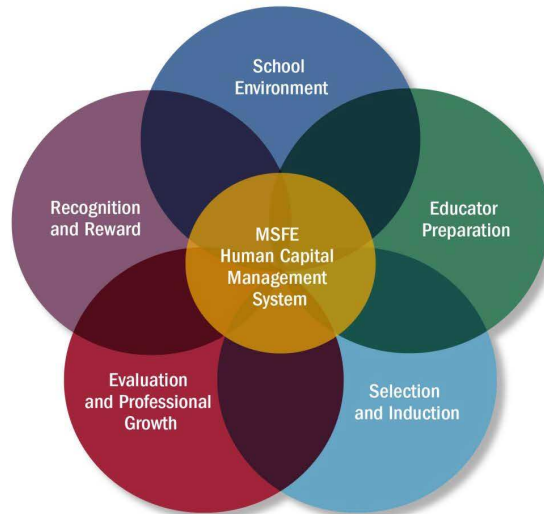


An Opportunity for Students, Teachers, and Leaders



Maine Schools for Excellence (MSFE) aims to:

- Advance student learning by implementing comprehensive human capital management strategies to better support and develop effective educators.
- Connect a select group of schools and districts with rigorous professional development opportunities, a new educator evaluation system aimed at helping teachers and leaders improve their practice, and performance bonuses that reward them for student success.



Districts Take the Lead



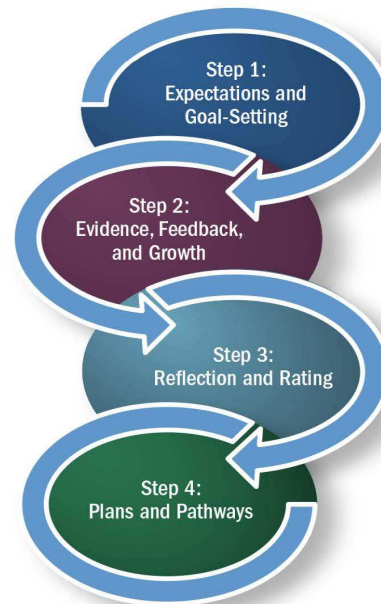
- **Collaboration** with district leaders, teachers association leaders, school principals, and teachers brings everyone to the table.
- **Customization** of new models and strategies allows districts to make decisions based on local need.

"I have had the opportunity to work with a variety of stakeholders as we dig down into the details of teacher effectiveness, staff professional development, and teacher incentives.... I have felt that my voice has been heard as our group has had one resounding goal throughout the process: to improve student learning."

Amanda Winslow, Grade 1 teacher,
Montello Elementary School,
Lewiston

The Model TEPG

- The Teacher Evaluation and Professional Growth (TEPG) program provides districts with model systems and protocols that they can adapt.
- TEPG encourages shared language around the craft of teaching and supports collaboration within and across schools.





For more information, visit
www.maine.gov/doe/excellence.

Send questions and comments to
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<http://www.maine.gov/doe/excellence/resources/index.html>.